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ABSTRACT

Operational definitions of two key variables in group communication can provide a theoretical perspective for considering communication behavior in group research: "risk taking," the tendency to prefer long shots with higher payoffs over sure things with lower payoffs; and the "risky-shift" phenomenon, the finding that after group discussion the individual members will recommend a less conservative course of action than they had espoused before. This paper reviews some of the literature relevant to these variables, and recommends guidelines for the use of the "risky-shift" phenomenon as the theoretic rationale for future research. (Author/SH)

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A QUEST FOR THEORETICAL SIGNIFICANCE IN SMALL GROUP COMMUNICATION RESEARCH: THE"RISKY-SHIFT" PHENOMENON

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Abstract

Central to the problem of theory development in group communication is the lack of relevant variables which emphasize the linkages between various communicative behaviors occurring in small groups. Operational definitions of two key variables--"risk-taking" and "risky-shift--provide a theoretical perspective which can be used to consider communication behavior in group research. "Risk-taking" in a group is defined as the tendency to prefer long shots with higher payoffs over sure things with lower payoffs; the valuable extension of which is the "risky-shift" phenomenon. Operationally, "risky-shift" is defined as the finding that after group discussion the individual members will privately recommend a less conservative course of action than they had privately espoused before. Thus, it is concluded that the "risky-shift" phenomenon can aid the researcher in group communication theory building.

Guidelines are recommended for the use of the "risky-shift" phenomenon as the theoretic rationale for future research. The guidelines are directed toward the cumulative development of new knowledge grounded in empirical research.

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Mortensen's (1970) analysis of small group communication research suggests several potential strategies for investigating key determinants of communicative exchange in groups. He offers ways to consider potentially relevant variables in group communication situations. These situations are defined as those occurrences in the process of interpersonal confrontation and discussion that generate decisions and/or alternative decisions. An example of a relevant variable is "risk-taking" in groups; the valuable extension of which is the "risky-shift" phenomenon. Operationally, "risky-shift" is defined as "the finding that after group discussion the individual members will privately recommend a less conservative course of action than they had privately espoused before" (Jones and Gerard, 1967, p. 718).

The purpose of this report is twofold: (1) to explicate the "risky-shift" phenomenon both conceptually and operationally and (2) to support its consideration as a valuable part in group communication research. Specifically, an attempt is made to show the heuristic potential of this variable in group communication theory construction.

Conceptualization and Operationalization

> It very often happens that individuals make private decisions concerning a problem and then meet together to arrive at a group decision concerning that same problem. . . It is clearly of some importance to know how such group decisions following discussion differ from individual decision . . .
>
> There are many dimensions on which decisions can vary and therefore many dimensions on which group decisions might consistently differ from individual decisions. One such dimension is "riskiness" or "risk-taking" (Brown, 1965, p. 656).

"Risk-taking" is defined as "the tendency to prefer long shots with higher payoffs over sure things with lower payoffs" (Jones and Gerard, 1967, p. 628).

In spite of the long tradition of research comparing the productivity of individuals in isolation and in groups, a direct attack on the determinants of group "risk-taking" was not launched until Stoner's (1961) research. In fact, for many years there was a general feeling among researchers of group processes that, while an individual might be willing to take great risks, the process of consultation and group decision would produce a more moderate, conservative policy. However, some recent experimentation shows that, under some conditions, group decision may encourage more risk than individual decisions (de Rivera, 1968). McGinnies (1970) commented on this phenomenon when he stated:

> A "risky-shift" effect is found in certain individuals who may have emotional problems, but also in groups where the decision-making process allows a diffusion of responsibility. Greater risk-taking, in other words, may tend to occur not only in some types of persons but also in instances where individual responsibility for the consequences can be concealed in a group decision (p. 442).

The interest in the "risky-shift" phenomenon can be traced to the Stoner work in which he examined groups instructed to discuss a series of problems and then unexpectedly asked to arrive at a unanimous decision.

> Stoner (1961) demonstrated that groups have a tendency to take greater risks than individuals, many studies have shown similar results over many tasks and conditions. The standard method for studying this effect consists of two steps. The subjects are first asked to make individual decisions on a series of problems in which it is possible to take greater or lesser risk. They are then placed in a group situation and required to discuss and make a group decision on the same problem. The difference between the mean of risk taken initially by the individuals and the mean of their later group decisions is termed a 'risky-shift.' A risky-shift is almost always found (Teger and Pruitt, 1967, p. 72).

Stoner's results showed that there was a predominant direction of shift on the problems between initial individual decisions and later group decisions.

Extending Stoner's work, two theories (Wallach, Kogan, & Bem, 1962; Brown, 1965) have been proposed and tested to explain the risky-shift, and evidence has been collected to support both of them (Stoner, 1961; Wallach, Kogan, & Bem, 1962; Wallach, Kogan, & Bem, 1964; Wallach & Bem, 1965; Wallach & Kogan, 1965; Wallach, Kogan, & Burt, 1965; Bem, Wallach, & Kogan, 1965; Brown, 1965; Wallach, Kogan, & Burt, 1967; Kogan & Wallach, 1967; Stoner, 1968; Kogan & Zaleska, 1969).

Wallach and Kogan (1965) theorized that the risky-shift is due to a spread of responsibility (Umbrella Effect). According to their Diffusion of Responsibility Theory, the fact that others are present to share the responsibility if failure occurs allows each group member to feel less personal blame for a possible failure. With less fear of failure, the group members feel free to take a greater risk. These authors found no difference in risky-shift between groups that had to reach a consensus and groups that only had to engage in a discussion. Hence, they conclude that the risky-shift results from some element of group discussion. They also found that simple acquaintance with the prior decisions made by other group members, without a group discussion, produced no risky-shift. Hence, they conclude that the risky-shift is due to some element of group discussion other than the exchange of information about preferences. They suggest that the "affective bonds formed in discussion" facilitate a diffusion of responsibility onto other group members and, hence, encourage a shift toward risk.

Brown's (1965) Value Theory is the major alternative to that advanced by Wallach and Kogan. According to this theory, cultural norms cause people initially to label most decision problems as warranting either a "risky" or a "cautious" approach. Such problems are said by Brown to generate a "value of risk" or a "value of caution." The implications of these labels are differently interpreted, so that in the actual initial decision, some people take more risk than others on an item. The risky-shift occurs only with items that generate a value of risk. It appears to be due to an exchange of information about initial decisions during the group discussion. As a result of this exchange, most group members discover that the other members of their group have taken as much or more risk than themselves on a problem. Consequently, they begin to wonder whether their behavior is actually in line with the value of risk that they have adopted. While they thought that they were being quite risky in their initial decision, comparison with others suggests that they were taking only an average level of risk (or less). Hence, they become more risky on the second decision in an effort to conform to the value of risk as newly interpreted.

Brown further suggests that the risky-shift also results from persuasive communication. If most members of the group agree that a risk is the correct value for the problem under consideration, then most of the reasons and justifications brought out in the discussion will favor risk. The subject will then hear additional reasons why risk is the correct action, thus moving them further toward the value of risk and causing them to take even greater risk (Teger & Pruitt, 1967).

An overview of the two theories reported and tested leads the present writers to conclude that Brown's theory seems to be better than that of Wallach and Kogan. We feel as if Brown offers a more indepth explanation of the risky-shift phenomenon: one that considers more relevant group variables---creating a more consistent frame of reference for future research.

The Heuristic Value of Risky-Shift in Group Communication Theory and Research

The decision to favor Brown's (1965) Value Theory of risky-shift leads to its consideration in the area of group communication. However, a consistent frame of reference for group communication research is founded in both of the two contrasting theories. This frame of reference necessitates two assumptions.

The first assumption underlies recommendations for future group communication risky-shift research directions, stipulating that a better explanation of this phenomenon may be that diffusion of responsiblity theory and value theory are interdependent: being linked by the communication behavior occurring in the group. In other words, by combining the two alternative theories a more complete avenue of group communication research might be conceived. Teger and Pruitt (1967), investigating the components of group risk-taking, confirmed a criticism that was made of the Wallach and Kogan (1962, 1965) diffusion of responsibility theory. Using an improved methodology, they found a risky-shift in groups that were not permitted to engage in a discussion but whose members could only exchange minimal information about their prior decisions. This finding is compatible with Brown's (1965) value theory; however, this does not totally discount Wallach and Kogan's theory. It may mean that Brown's theory is a more thorough explanation of risky-shift, one that considers responsibility diffusion and more. It may also mean that all of the communication activities occurring during risky-shift are better explained by this theory.

The second assumption, actually generated from the first, posits that there may be other theoretical explanations of the communication behaviors occurring during risky-shift and/or that more than two theories interdependently exist explaining such communication phenomena. Hence, communication researchers must place emphasis on locating other alternative explanations for the existence of risky-shift.

These two assumptions lead to more specific recommendations for future group communication risky-shift research. These recommendations consider the testing of other alternative theories, the primary concerns of both communication and risky-shift research. Such explanations are viewed as heuristic in that they generate different approaches to group communication investigation.

It has occurred to more than one social psychologist that convergence of opinion which develops when individuals become a group is a manifestation of the balance principle (Brown, 1965; Heider, 1958). Newcomb (1953) suggested that imbalance in a group(e.g., caused by risk-taking) provides the occasion for communicative acts to eliminate the imbalance. Back (1951), for instance, found that subjects who started with different interpretations of the same material and who were given an opportunity to discuss the matter were influenced

by another . . . . A consideration of the communication of risky-shift in terms of convergence of opinion explains it as a manifestation of the balance principle.

1. Group communication risky-shift research should study the process of imbalance to balance in groups. It should be apparent that any of the balance theories could account for the communication of risky-shift in this theoretical perspective. The results of such research undoubtedly extend the current status of small group communication research.

Another alternative communication of risky-shift explanation stems from conformity theory and research. Pennington, Harary, and Bass (1958) found that individual opinion change was greater when subjects were instructed to discuss a question in order to arrive at a group consensus than when groups were simply asked to have a discussion without being required to make a group decision. A similar finding was shown by Marquis (1962): the convergence toward a position of greater risk occurred even when there was no requirement to reach a unanimous group decision. In a classic Sherif (1947) study, a group of subjects had the task of estimating the extent of movement of a single point of light in a completely dark room (the autokinetic effect). The light was exposed to each subject by a small shutter controlled by the experimenter. The individual judgments (estimates) are analogous to the personal decisions made on the risk problems in advance of any group discussion (Brown, 1965). The light estimates were quite different from subject to subject independently; however, when done as a group, individual judgments converged. From these conformity findings it seems reasonable to conclude that the communication of risky-shift is a manifestation of conformity in groups.

2. Communication of risky-shift research should utilize group conformity research. If such a concept as group conformity can explain the communication of risky-shift, then research in this area could prove extremely valuable for group communication theory building. For example, defining shift toward risk as the communication processes of group conformity immediately sets up a theoretical link between a multitude of constructs, e.g., the rhetoric of the high risk taker and group pressure.

In essence, both balance theory and conformity theory can function as alternative explanations of the communication of risky-shift. The empirical investigation of these approaches would seem invaluable to both group communication theory and risk-taking theory.

CONCLUSION

This consideration of the risky-shift phenomenon should convince us of the heuristic energy that exists for the interested communication researcher; however, questions still remain in the area of risky-shift research.

What these writers are suggesting is that fruitful experimentation in the area of risky-shift research would seem to help in teasing out some of the fragmented research findings that contribute to the qualitative lack of good theory in group communication research. The central problem in small group communication research is the inconsistent frame of reference which often overlooks unified theory.

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